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ABSTRACT

Electronic mail is one means of dealing with resistance and recalcitrance among students faced with class materials that challenge their beliefs. A professor at a small technical university in the south found three topics particularly difficult for her conservative Christian students to deal with: the radicalism of the Romantic poets, feminism, and homosexuality. Through electronic mail, however, the instructor found a means of challenging her students. After collecting her students' journal entries via electronic mail, she would post them anonymously for all to read and respond to on a electronic bulletin board. Collaborative learning of this sort benefits both the instructor and students alike. In this case, the instructor would probably never have been aware of the "backlash" of feminism felt by her female students, many of whom began their feminist statements with, "I am not a feminist but..." Similarly, electronic mail proved productive for debates about the "immoral" lifestyle of Shelley and Byron and the religious skepticism of Blake and Shelley. Electronic mail has other advantages in that it encourages participation from students who would not normally speak out; it fosters enthusiasm and interest where other more conventional forms of communication do not; and it constitutes a more intimate relationship between communicants than do other forms of communication, while at the same time preserving anonymity. Contains eight references. (TB)

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USING ELECTRONIC MAIL TO FOSTER COOPERATIVE LEARNING

Paper Presented at the Conference on College Composition and Communication, Nashville TN March 1994

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USING ELECTRONIC MAIL
TO FOSTER COOPERATIVE LEARNING

Making the move from U.C. Berkeley, where I taught English courses as a graduate teaching associate, to a small state university in the South, where I am an Assistant Professor of English, has required some adjustments. In particular, the types of students I encounter at this relatively small engineering school are different and the student body less diverse than at Berkeley. Students tend to be very conservative in their outlook. This might not be exclusively a function of locale but evidence of a larger trend, for as John Trimbur remarks in a review in the February 1994 *College English*, "College students of the 1980s and 1990s do seem to be more conservative, more career-oriented , and more acquisitive than their predecessors" (Timber, 1994, p. 201). Whatever the case, the resistances I sometimes encounter from students in my classes have often been unexpected and difficult to deal with. Fortunately, I have been able to use capabilities offered by electronic mail on computers to deal with resistence and recalcitrance among students faced with class material that challenges their beliefs. In addition to simply

being reluctant to cover the amount of material required in a literature survey, three areas that are problematic in classes are the radicalism of Romantic poets, the topic of feminism, and homosexuality. All of these topics prove difficult for students coming from a conservative Christian background. It is very hard for an instructor to directly challenge such students' beliefs without alienating them. With shared electronic mail journals these students' peers comment directly on their beliefs, which proves more persuasive and less threatening and confrontational than being forced as an instructor to try to argue with students about their beliefs.

Let me explain first what I mean by "shared electronic mail journals." Students here have access via many terminals to two VAX computers, manufactured by Digital Equipment Corporation, which run under the VMS operating system. Each user is given an account name, made up of the student's initials and the last four digits of the student's social security number, and a password with which the individul may access her or his account. It is possible to communicate between individual accounts via electronic mail. Files can be sent via electronic mail from one student to another, from one student to the rest of the class, or from me to all the students in a class, or I can make a file public so that students may view it simply by calling it up, or even copy it. I have decided that making the journal compilations public is the best way to get the group journals to the students because sometimes they are so long that they clutter up the students' computer accounts.

In my sophomore literature survey classes I require students to keep a journal on computer which they send to me by electronic mail. At the beginning of the semester, we meet in a computer lab for one hands-on session taught by employees of the D. W. Mattson Computer Center who show students how to log into the computer and send and receive messages. They get practice creating a file, or a written text, on the computer, and are told about the keyboard functions and what commands can be used to create a file, move within a file, delete material in a file, send a file to another account, and how to cancel and save a file. They receive instruction designed to satisfy only what they will need for writing and sending their journal on the VAX. I have since decided it is useful to schedule one or two subsequent meetings in VAX lab so students who are having trouble with various aspects of the assignment can get direct help from me on these occasions.

Having the journal files sent to me via electronic mail allows for anonymous compilation of journal entries in one file which is then made available to all members of the class. I omit names and other identifying features of the journals which were sent to me. Making the entries anonymous is a good way to ensure that students don't feel constrained in keeping their journals and seems to me the only fair way to conduct sharing personal writing like this. Following the first entry, I require references to the group journal entries in future journal entries.

Presenting their peers' writing as something worthy of consideration I believe validates the opinions of student writers and thinkers. The collective journals also have other positive effects.

Students who were not generating much thought in journal writing were motivated after seeing some of the more prolific entries to put more effort into journals. Students can reinforce points I make in lecture when they see a mistaken comment in another journal. Sometimes students will reject another student's opinion in a forthright manner that I cannot do in the classroom situation because of a desire to be politic.

Although the first time they write their journals students don't know that they are going to be shared there are very few objections to group journals. Most students are enthusiastic, like the student who wrote this journal entry:

> Now to the class journal. At first I kind of thought the class journal was a lame idea, but after reading the journals I thougt it was TERRIFIC. It was very interesting reading. I felt as if I was able to get into all of my classmates' heads. I liked it so much I even went back and read through some of the other classes' journals.

Of course, being in the students' heads can be a very scary place, at least for me! One thing that many students react to is the topic of feminism. This fact is not so surprising as is the way students react to the subject. Dale Spender's recent article in *Ms. Magazine*, "An Alternative to Madonna: How to deal with 'I'm not a feminist, but . . .'" obviates an aspect of the recent backlash against feminism (also explored in Susan Faludi's recent bestseller by the title *Backlash*). Even women have become part of the backlash against feminism, and "feminism" has become a dirty word. Spender describes "What has become a joke in feminist circles: the individual

who declares 'Oh, I am not a feminist! . . . '" Spender wants women to assert "proudly and publicly" that they are feminists (Spender, 1993, p. 45). I have had many journals with variations on this theme containing the statement "I am not a feminist, but . . ." Even one woman who stands up for women's rights in the following journal entry reveals the attitude that feminism is a dirty word:

"Vindication of the Rights of Woman"

> Oh boy, I could go on and on about this subject, but I won't. I am a firm believer and supporter of women's rights. My boyfriend and I have deep discussions and sometimes I get made because he calls me a feminist. I find that word a little bit radical and it does not describe me or the way I feel about this subject. I am glad to see this work by Mary Wollstonecraft. I was under the impression that women just recently started fighting for their rights.

Such entries as this show that collaborative learning extends to the instructor as well. Requiring these journals allows me to see what students are thinking -- I probably never would have anticipated that "backlash" was felt -- in some cases even more extremely than in this example-- by women in class. Of course, a written journal might accomplish the same thing, but sharing written journals with students, in addition to the instructor, is much more difficult than sharing electronic mail journals and I think the feedback students receive from their peers is invaluable. An example of how comments from a peer might alter attitudes or at least influence the opinion of the class as a whole comes from a student's response to a very chauvinistic journal entry:

"Men and women can work together but only under the condition of male dominance." HELL YEAH, BY GAWD!

Pardon my sarcasm, but I almost CHOKED when I read the above passage in last week's journals. The idea of any kind of dominance makes my skin crawl, even if I'm not the victim in that particular situation. I'm told it's useless trying to argue with some people, but I'm not doing this for the sake of being contrary. I respect other people's opinions until they try to tell me I'm inferior because when my parents' sperm and egg came together, a FEMALE CHILD began developing!

Students benefit from perspectives offered by such entries as the following by a nontraditional student:

I like "A Vindication of the Rights of Woman" I can appreciate the strengths of men; physical as well as others. I would just like to be appreciated for my strengths. I am more than wife and Mom. I do have original thoughts and if I want to express them, I want them to be received and evaluated and then accepted or rejected based on the thought, not on the gender of the person who had the thought. Women have had the reputation of being conniving or scheming. We have had to be to accomplish our goals. Being able to work your plan, using whatever skills and talents you have, to advance your agenda, makes you equal if not superior. Whether any male recognizes this is irrelevant!

I'm anxious to read the other women writers to see if they were actually qualified to be incuded in this anthology or were merely put there to "satisfy the little woman"!

The last remark in this student journal refers to the discussion of the canon of literature which I alway introduce in conjuction with the Preface to the text we use, *The Norton Anthology*, which makes claims for the liberality of the selection of texts. As we got into examining individual poets, one student reacted very stronglyt to the fact that, as the *Norton* comments, though in his own lifetime he was the most preeminent of the Romantics, Byron is not considered to be as significant a figure any more.

> The critics claim that he did not represent the views of a romantic, but that is not true. He may have written in a different style than the others, but isn't that actually what romanticism was all about? He didn't do what all the other writers of the time were doing, but actually lived for himself. This evidence is clearly shown in the biographical information in the book. Byron was a definite wildman . . . Byron's doing things in his own way and carefree attitude are not the only reason I disagree witht he critics, however. The thing which I disagree with is what they feel makes literature great of worthy of being considered a part of the 'canon.' They feel that Wordsworth and Coleridge represent the feelings and beliefs of the Romantic era, thus their works are included, while some leave out Byron because he had a different way of thinking, even though people seem to get more out of Byron's works and actually find them more enjoyable to read.

Although most students, such as the one quoted, like Byron, several a semester have problems with his "immoral" lifestyle, and they find

the religious skepticism of Blake and Shelley equally disturbing. Here's one student's reaction to the immoral Romantics:

> . . . I would like to say how much I back what the young lady wrote in her journal about the filth we have to read in class. We can't read the Bible in schools today but we can read the atheistic views of certain authors. . . . Some of the most beautiful poetry you can find is in the Bible, why aren't we analyzing it instead of some of the trash we do look at. The views of nature and of life are like no other, why is it we can choose to ignore that we are scared it might change our lives. I know for a fact that some of my friends who are alumni that contribute greatly to the well-being of this university would not find this literature very tasteful or worth spending their money on. I am sorry if I seem rude or harsh but a lot of people forget about born again Christians when they speak of freedom of speech and thier rights of religion.

I could not answer these objections any better than did the student who reported in his journal that he read these comments in *Saturday Night Live'* s Dana Carvey's Church Lady's voice or another student who was more reasoned in his reply:

> Maybe this person should put their Christian morals aside for a moment and just enjoy some of the best writing ever produced. The fact that Byron had an affair with his half sister should not dertermine whether or not you enjoy his works. If this is your routine practice, then I hate to tell you that you are really missing out on some great works. Likewise, with Shelley as a "diehard atheist" and the

> obsessive relationship of William and Dorothy Wordsworth. These people have led strange lives, but their lives have been put under a microscope because of their fame. So don't be too quick to judge them, everyone has faults. Perhaps you should look in the mirror, I'm sure you have some faults, too (I see one of them is spelling).

Perhaps the tone of these responses points to a drawback of peer critiques: the dissenting side might feel marginalized. But the object is not to humiliate or ridicule those who have a strict belief system but to get them to see beyond their narrow categories and open up to literature.

As J. Yellowlease Douglas points out in her "The Audience Made Real: Hypertext and the Teaching of Writing," electronic texts seem to invite a more critical attitude on the part of students than handwritten or even typewritten texts.

> With its distinctive appearance, the hand- or typewritten text became a stand-in for the absent author, a reminder that someone just like them had labored at it and would, doubtless, be upset or offended by critical remarks and suggestions. In contrast, in the electronic classroom the texts seem to shed their authors' presence, apparently encouraging readers to assume more openly critical attitudes toward the work . . . (Douglas, 1993, p. 19)

This critical attitude did seem to get a bit out of hand in the class section from which the last journal was taken. As a way to make the journals a more relaxed and "fun" experience I say that journals do not have to constitute a formal, structured paper but can be

disjointed, misspelled and in incomplete sentences. It may seem like a mistake for an English teacher to encourage "sloppy" writing, but I am convinced that this makes the journal writing experience a lot more pleasant than it would be if students were graded on grammar, spelling and punctuation. However, perhaps I didn't make the casual nature of the journals clear to students in the section where things got acrimonious, because one way of directing a cheap shot, as above, was always to attack spelling. In another section, when a student took it upon herself to send around a list of misspellings and grammar mistakes in the class's journal entries the class was very indignant and resentful.

If this is one possible drawback to shared journals, the benefits of electronic mail more than make up for it. Students, and e-mail users in general, find that they want to use e-mail when they hate conventional communications and they feel a more intimate relationship with someone they casually correspond with on e-mail than they do in letters. This fact receives corroboration from John Seabrook, who wrote an article on Bill Gates, the chairman of Microsoft, called "E-Mail from Bill" in the *New Yorker* magazine. He published his e-mail address in the article and wrote on the phenomenon of e-mail in a subsequent issue, February 7, 1994. One e-mail writer confessed to him:

> I'm still trying to figure out how, precisely, e-mail is different from other communications, why I don't mind writing e-mail but hate writing letters, and why e-mail makes me feel as if I am free to send a bunch of nonsense to you, a person I've never met & likely will never meet, when I would never do so

> if it meant writing it down on paper & putting it in the snail mail. (Seabrook, 1994, p. 8)

I have found this willingness to communicate through e-mail in students who might never speak in class but make some startling revelations in e-mail. One student told me he was gay, another that she was pregnant, and one student confessed how out of place he felt in college. The first two revelations I omitted from journals to preserve the students' anonymity, but the student who felt alienated in college got a lot of sympathy in student journals written as a reply.

Electronic mail has proven to be a good way of talking about controversial issues precisely because students can make statements without revealing their identities if they don't want to. This works well with such topics as homosexuality, which I make an issue in my survey classes. In an article in an NCTE publication called *Literature Instruction*, Arthur Applebee remarks that the English curriculum is moving with "glacial slowness" (Applebee, 1992, p. 7) as far as changes in the canon go. Not only is the curriculum still "dominated by familiar selections drawn primarily from a white Anglo-Saxon tradition" (Applebee, 1992, p. 7), but, judging from my students' reactions to some of the ideas I present in class, teachers are unwilling to address controversial issues such as homosexuality in literature even in cases involving canonical writers. Often I show a film which has segments on Shakespeare's *Sonnets* and one in particular, on Sonnet 18, narrated by Christopher Ricks, on one of the Sonnets to the Young Man, always provokes comment. For instance, one student remarks:

> Another thing I wanted to comment on was finding out that some of Shakespeare's sonnets were written to men. So were Shakespeare and Tennyson gay? And if they were, why isn't this common knowledge?

Another student registers a similar surprise:

> I never imagined Shakespeare addressing another man with a love poem. It makes me wonder if, maybe he was a weird-genius kind of person. I mean, I thought homosexuality was unheard of in his day. I guess that just goes to show how naive some of us are. Obviously homosexuality has been going on for quite some time -- it was just kept in the closet. I haven't heard or read much of Shakespeare's *Sonnets* , but I think everyone has heard "Shall I Compare Thee to a Summer's Day." How could he be speaking to another man? And, why? It is quite interesting to see the way he praises young men, yet insults women (the "Dark Lady"). It's as if the lady is some evil demon who is only out to destroy man. It infuriates me!

The *Norton Anthology* compares Tennyson's *In Memoriam* to the expressions of "male friendship" (Abrams, 1993, 1084) in Shakespeare's *Sonnets* , an explanation that I find a patent lie. I therefore read my class one or two of Shakespeare's *Sonnets to the Young Man* , and sometimes show the Ricks commentary. I am careful to explain possible explanations for Shakespeare's homoeroticism (satire of love conventions, for instance) but assert that both in his case and Tennyson's we should at least *consider* the possibility that the homoeroticism was genuine. Homosexuality is a topic that provokes strong reaction from the more conservative

students, though the above are very reasoned responses from students who are pretty open minded. When homosexuality is brought up as a possible explanation for Tennyson's strong feelings about Arthur Hallam as expressed in *In Memoriam* many students react with revulsion. Yet others write more calmly in reaction such as this entry:

> Tennyson seems to be quite controversial with his apparent homosexual conduct, but whether he was or not does not change the fact that he appears to me to be a very sensitive person. I do feel sorry for him; seventeen years is a long time to mourn a person's death. He is accomplishing a magnificent feat, though: he has immortalized Arthur Hallam. How many best friends whould do that? I would consider it quite an honor.

These reactions are far more persuasive ultimately for conservative students than it would be to make the classroom a battleground where the authoritarian teacher shouts down any dissent. The electronic mail journal allows a dialogue among students in which everyone has a right to express an opinion.

Electronic mail networking has revolutionized discourse in the profession of English with dialogues among user groups like the Anglo-Saxon Network, the Blake discussion group, the Joyce discussion group, or any other of a myriad of user groups devoted to a particular topic. Although it has only been a requirement in one of my classes, I have tried to encourage students to explore on-line user groups by giving them instructions on how to obtain a list of user groups and how to sign up for one that interests them. I have read

excerpts from some on-line dialogues that are pertinent to class discussion so we have become, in a sense, a part of such discussion. In an upper division or a graduate course it might be appropriate to require subscription to such an on-line discussion group, and students' participation could be monitored by the instructor.

A final way I have used the capabilities of electronic mail is for group work. When I have classes that are small enough, I divide students into groups and have them analyze poems or songs during class. They must report on their findings, and several times I have required the recorder of the group to send the group's notes to everyone in class by electronic mail. On the midterm or final exam they are asked a question based on the group's presentations of their work, and so are held responsible for familiarity with the shared notes.

I haven't used networking in class work on composing essays but this would be an interesting application of the possibilities networking allows. Ideally, a class would have more than a semester to work on and respond to each other's writing, however. On the other hand, if peer reviews of essays in the draft stage took care of mechanical errors in students' writing the instructor could be freed from a lot of tedious proofreading! But, if I had to choose between them, I wouldn't give up the shared journals for shared drafts. In less formal and more frequent responses to a wide range of literature as exemplified in the journal students are forced to reveal more of their attitudes and world views allowing for richer communication, exchange and collaboration.

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